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ABSTRACT

The paper examines parent involvement in the governance of schools. Five structures that incorporate elected parent representatives in consultative and decision-making committees established by law are discussed: (1) School Improvement Councils (Massachusetts); (2) Boards of Governors (England and Wales); (3) Counseils d'etablissement (France); (4) consigli di istituto (Italy); and (5) Elternbeirate (German Federal Republic). In purpose and form they are strongly marked by local political and social forces and by the felt needs of particular governments at particular times. In character and content, parent councils are institutions where the gap between rhetoric and reality is almost a defining characteristic. A redefining of the parental role and movement is recommended. (18 references) (SI)

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PARENTS AS A NEW FOUND LAND :

REFLECTIONS ON FORMAL PARENT PARTICIPATION

IN FIVE POLITIES

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School Improvement Councils (Massachusetts), Boards of Governors (England and Wales), Conseils d'établissement (France), consigli di istituto (Italy), Elternbeiräte (German Federal Republic) - all these are solid structures incorporating elected parent representatives in consultative and decision-making committees established by law to assist in various aspects of the government of schools. Each of them slots more or less smoothly into impressive bureaucratically operated structures. Each of those larger structures attempts in turn to achieve a proper mix of central legislative control, local monitoring and teacher autonomy. The purposes, functions and procedures of these consultative and decision-making committees, and of parents within them, are elaborately defined in laws, decrees and circulars.

For all their apparent solidity, most of these committees are quite recent, at least in their present form(1). If we read the rules and regulations, and sample even a tiny proportion of the talk and writing generated by and through all this heavily patterned human activity, we have an impression of civilization advancing. It is as though, in relation to schools, parents were a formless, meaningless category - savages almost - but have now, happily, been discovered by a variety of political professional and bureaucratic Columbuses, and are now colonized and incorporated into the formal structures of education. In this sense, parents are a 'New Found Land'.

Perhaps it is the recency of this colonization which explains a certain tension between, on the one hand, the solid, legalistic structures, with their voting mechanisms, rules of procedure, defined channels of communication, etc., and, on the other, the curiously protean, elusive quality of parents themselves, the people who operate these mechanisms as an 'interest group' alongside other groups or categories: e.g. teachers or elected politicians.

What in fact do parents do within these structures? What do they think they do? What effect do they have? What relation does their activity have on the development of children (theirs or other people's)? The difficulty experienced in answering these questions reflects in part the novelty of much of this activity and the paucity of research: but it reflects also, and more interestingly, a fundamental ambivalence or uncertainty about the parental role in relation to schools. It is as though the 'savages' were now wearing trousers, and this visible fact helped us - the educationalists, the 'civilized' people, those who are acknowledged to be expert about schools - to ignore that in terms of attitudes and purposes they remain largely unchanged.

This protean, ambivalent quality makes principled cross-national comparison both easy and difficult. It is conceptually easy (though complicated) to compare the solid structures. In all societies claiming to be democratic, the perceived need to associate parents in some official way with schools produces mechanisms for achieving legitimacy by voting, balancing parental influence against teacher influence, ensuring financial accountability, reserving final decision to elected politicians, etc. These mechanisms are predictably similar in character though differing in detail according to the disposition of power and the traditions of different places. If the mechanisms themselves are taken to be progress, then to record them is to record progress: the process of colonization moves forward. What is much more difficult is to compare what goes on within the structures, for parents themselves are more various, more obviously affected by cultural and ideological factors and more unpredicatable than structures.

If one looks at a single system for producing the legally required association of parents with the schools their children attend through systems

of elected representatives and committees' (2), one is tempted to believe that this protean quality which parent representatives have is a result of inadequate political imagination or faulty legal definition. When one looks at five and identifies the same feature at the heart of each, one begins to suspect that this mismatch between form and content, between structures of consultation and decision-making and parental input, is central to the topic; that it must be an essential aspect of any attempt to define or explain it. The forward march of parent involvement is not an inevitable consequence of the rightness of the parent cause, still less a result of pressure from parents themselves. Rather, it is precisely because the definition of the parental task vis à vis schools is so blurred and uncertain that it has seemed useful to certain interests to incorporate them into the formal structures of education.

Consider by way of example two polities which have recently legislated for the formal incorporation of parental influence into the running of schools: England and Wales, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Each of these units offers unusually favourable conditions for parents to take an interest in school management. In each, a wide range of 'private' parent associations has existed for many years, most obviously in the form of parent-teacher associations. Each is a democracy, and claims to value the citizen's interest in and contribution to the institutions of the state. Each is so organized that the central state is held to be balanced and complemented by a strong element of local democracy: in particular, schools are locally administered and resourced. Over the last century or so, the continuity and stability of state institutions has in both cases been preserved, and has not been dramatically interrupted by revolution or invasion. All these factors would lead one to expect a gradual maturing of formal structures linking families and schools, and indeed the proponents of such councils and committees often speak as though

this were the case.

The reality is otherwise. While it is true that there has been a long tradition of parent activity, that activity has rarely, and only recently, been directed towards inventing or demanding formal councils and committees upon which parents, defined and labelled as such, would share power with teachers, politicians, etc. Rather, the initiative has come from politicians themselves, and parents have in some ways tagged along rather than made the running. In addition, the motives of the politicians have been (to use as neutral a phrase as possible) 'mixed', and have not normally included as a central part of their motivation a strong and stable view of the educational case for associating parents with schools, nor a wish to placate a large and vociferous parental lobby clamouring to sit on official committees - for the very good reason that that lobby has not existed.

In England and Wales, for example, the spate of legislation which reached some sort of culmination in the massive Education Reform Act of 1988 represents, among other things, a growing belief by central government that parent interests can be used to subvert traditional power centres (local education authorities (LEAs), political parties, professional groups such as teacher unions) and promote central government's increasingly radical and increasingly centralist analysis of education's purposes and needs. The decade or so prior to 1988 can be viewed very much as an institutional learning process. Beginning with a Labour prime minister's bid in 1976 for the political middle ground by appealing directly to the gut-feelings of more traditional parents who had been disturbed by changes in the post-1944 system of schooling(3), this learning process acquired real momentum as, from 1979 onwards, Margaret Thatcher aimed to shift the balance between left and right for good. By 1988 parents had been allocated

a formidable range of powers over schools. In addition to highly explicit rights to information, choice and complaint in relation to their individual child, they were now formally involved in a wide range of major policy issues: monitoring the school curriculum and the general policy of the school, running the finances of schools, wielding the ultimate sanction of "opting out" of LEA control and becoming effectively an independent school receiving grant directly from central government. The basic strategy has been to subvert LEAs (which are under local political control) and move towards something which looks increasingly like a simple two-tier structure (central government/school)(4). In all this change, and in spite of the rhetoric, parents have been wheeled in to give a non-political air to a highly political package. Whether they will in practice conform to the present government's ideology as fully as the government thinks remains of course to be seen.

Massachusetts' School Improvement Councils provide a distinctly different mix. In England and Wales, recent changes in school government have to be placed in the context of a determined increase of central power (i.e. the Department of Education and Science in London) at the expense of intermediate authorities (Local Education Authorities) so that the new roles allocated to schools and parents are in a way a method of subverting those intermediate authorities. The US scene is very different. At the national level, central institutions (federal government, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, etc.) are both more remote and less powerful than their British counterparts: indeed, hamstrung by constitutional principle in ways which make direct and decisive intervention in education impossible. Thus a closer parallel to the D.E.S. is in reality state government: but here, too (at least in Massachusetts(5)) late eighteenth-century thinking, enshrined in the state constitution and, even more importantly, in people's attitudes and norms, makes

the state reluctant to intervene directly. Thus, although formally responsible for education within the Commonwealth, central government seems to the European observer to limit its activity to a mixture of bribery (i.e. offering funds in exchange for desired behaviours), cajoling and the collection and dissemination of information. Nor is it even the case that intermediate authorities in the shape of school districts can act decisively in the short term or plan effectively in the long term. They too are subject to more or less unstable local forces operating on and through the electoral system and the very close financial controls built into it. At the bottom of this complex structure is the individual school. At this level, teachers seem historically to have enjoyed less of a sense of professional autonomy than their British counterparts, and less collegiality in planning and implementing a curriculum for the whole school. 'At the bottom of the pile' seems for many to be not just a factual description of the school's placing in the hierarchy, but also a comment on its low prestige and limited capacity for initiative.

Ostensibly, Massachusetts' School Improvement Councils are an attempt by the state to alleviate this feeling of powerlessness at the level of the individual school by setting up elected committees of teachers and parents to spend state grants on the school's behalf. They are an institutional outcome of the diagnosis of educational problems offered by Goodlad and others(6): that for change to be rooted and substantial, it must involve a sense of commitment at individual school level and within the community which the school serves. This diagnosis may be (and in the author's view is) acute and sensible. However, a study of the way in which SICs became part of the legal machinery of education in Massachusetts over the period 1985-88(7) indicates the following facts:

a) academic analyses like Goodlad's had little direct impact on the argument, whatever their importance in feeding a climate of opinion among decision-makers;

b) SICs did not result from pressure from parents or teachers for such committees;

c) SICs had in fact little link with existing parent activity, which was considerable but either individualistic in tone and purpose or crisis-oriented (as in the large amount of organized parent activity resulting from the long confrontation over desegregation in Boston);

d) SICs were an essentially incremental innovation, sidestepping any attempt at a radical rethink which might have altered the basic balance of power between state and school district;

e) SICs emerged as a way of 'selling' a disparate package of other policies encouraging accountability, equalization, improved quality, etc.;

f) the most urgent stimulus for this legislation was the financial crisis created at local level by "Proposition 2½" which in 1980 put a cap on municipal tax rates of 2½% of full property values, and produced an acute and growing financial crisis which could be alleviated only by state intervention.

To look comparatively at even two attempts to associate parents formally with schools is to be reminded vividly of two central features of such innovations.

Firstly, in purpose and form they are strongly marked by local political and social forces, and by the felt needs of particular governments at particular times. Massachusetts provides a simple illustration of this. The seven months (January to July 1985) which saw the emergence of the School Improvement Council as an apparently viable answer to a wide range of problems were also months of strong and increasing pressure to achieve legislation on education, and SICs emerged almost as a marketing device. The low level of real commitment to substantial parent involvement was revealed partly by the low level of finance achieved (the originally proposed grant of $50 per student was reduced to $10), but also by the fact that only two weeks before the Act was passed, the SIC clauses were for a brief period actually voted down by Senate. In a similar way, the massive French political crisis of May 1968 produced pressure for visible government action. When in September 1968 the Minister of education said publicly to the largest parents' association in France: 'I tell you quite simply, I need you', he was telling the truth(8). It was not prior commitment to the importance of parental input to the educational process which led to the establishment of elected councils with parent representation: it was blind political panic. The short-term motivation for parent councils, combined with considerable variations in power structures (highly centralized in France, for example; highly decentralized in Massachusetts) tend to produce very marked variations in form and in the responsibilities allocated in different places and in different times.

Secondly, in character and content parent councils are institutions where the gap between rhetoric and reality is almost a defining characteristic. In Massachusetts, the rhetoric is built even into the nomenclature: who could be against 'school improvement'? For all the multiplicity of purposes and circumstances, parent councils are above all attempts to achieve consensus, or

at least give the impression that consensus is achievable. The very word 'parent' is part of the rhetoric. To 'consult' parents, to 'involve' them, is surely virtuous; yet what is it that they offer that the expert (the teacher or administrator) does not? In consulting and involving, do experts simply aggregate their often opposing opinions and do what they intended to do anyway, with the extra legitimacy which the association with parents confers? In some circumstances (e.g. France, Italy) the empty category of parents is rapidly filled with political content, so that it becomes difficult to see how parents differ from citizens or voters: although they continue to claim freedom from political bias, parent associations in some cases become virtual adjuncts of political parties with the electoral process for parent representatives more or less assimilated to the general electoral process(9). It will be interesting to observe the impact of the British Education Reform Act over the next few years. The provisions about parental choice, opting out and local financial management will inevitably project parents into an increasingly politicized process, with schools having to court parent groups in the interests of institutional survival. Whether that politicization will acquire party political content is less clear, but seems, at least in some environments, quite probable.

To look at parent activity in this perspective leads easily to cynicism. Indeed, the disillusioned parent activist is almost a type. Such individuals (often women: the role of women in these developments has yet to be fully acknowledged) launch out into the politics of 'school improvement' with enthusiasm, energy and intelligence. Motivated in part by a generalized civic idealism, in part by concern for their own child or children, they find in the parent movement a rewarding field for initiative and long-term engagement. To discover through their own day-to-day commitment the very real constraints (especially political and economic) upon parent activity can be painful. In

systems where Marxian interpretations are readily available, disappointment is sometimes expressed in terms of a wider theory of society: 'parent' is seen as an essentially bourgeois category, and the ruling class is believed to be manipulating parent councils to distract the workers' attention from real issues of economic and political power. Thus parents who attempt to operate the systems set up for them are held to become dupes or accomplices. Even in Massachusetts, several informants saw School Improvement Councils as simply absorbing parents into the bureaucracy - 'emasculating' was the phrase one informant used.

Disappointment is often understandable and justified, but it may also result from unrealistic expectations of what is possible. In this area, disillusion may flow particularly from the temptation to view the family, the parent, and the councils and committees within which the parent is allotted an official role, as being separate from the wider institutions and purposes of society. Too individualistic or too idealistic a perspective may concentrate attention exclusively on the failure to implement the promises of the rhetoric, so that the observer fails to notice a number of concrete developments actually taking place within the new structures.

To start with, some of the things promised by the rhetoric actually do happen. School Improvement Councils in Massachusetts do spend money, and some of it is well spent: i.e. children benefit. Similarly, school councils in Italy in the mid-1970s certainly generated a great deal of justified scepticism: ineffectual, hamstrung by central government directives or bureaucratic obscurantism, dominated by political and other groupings - all these criticisms can be readily substantiated in many places. But in at least some other places, the new structures were genuinely liberating. Ordinary people really

did meet in large enthusiastic mass meetings to discuss educational matters; teachers really did attempt to adapt their methods and content to the needs of families; institutional change which had seemed unthinkable really did become possible. The patchy and imperfect nature of that change has to be measured not by the rhetoric of 1968 but in terms of half a century's near-immobility. Parents were only part of that change; but they had their role to play, and some of them played it with verve and intelligence.

If some intended results happen, so also do a good many results which are either unintended or only dimly perceived at the outset. Whatever the precise balance and shape of the consultative devices adopted in different places, it is not possible to set up such elaborate mechanisms for channelling and/or controlling lay input without facilitating a large and more or less unpredictable leakage of information about education. Quite often the bureaucracy can be observed struggling to plug the gaps e.g. by excluding parents from crucial meetings on confidentiality grounds, as in France in 1968-9 or Italy in 1974-5(10). Nonetheless, however spasmodic and ineffective the flow of information, it does flow, and the possession of information is often transmuted by parent activism into real pressure for change. Further, it tends to stimulate publications aimed at parents, sometimes provided by their associations, sometimes by schools or administrators, sometimes by Commercial publishers. Thus lobbies and interest groups form and life is breathed into the parent movement - not always acting through the channels officially provided. The impact of increased information flow will naturally be greater and more destabilizing in societies where bureaucracies have a very firm grip on education (France, Italy) or where secretiveness is deeply embedded in the political culture (United Kingdom) than in more radically open societies such as Massachusetts.

What is really going on here is a protracted and disorganized learning process. Parents, teachers and pupils are engaged in a complicated three-way conversation centred on and motivated by concern for an individual child's development; on occasion that individual commitment may merge into a more general activism exerted at various levels from class to school to locality to region - even to nation and beyond(11). Rather little attempt has been made to monitor and record this important informal learning process, nor even its formal school-based aspects (styles of communication from school to parents, information-giving sessions laid on by teachers etc.). We ought, as Atkin et.al, argue(12), to be 'listening to parents', and the transcripts they provide of parents talking through their own experiences of bringing up children and working with (or against!) teachers are compelling evidence of the value of doing that. That we fail to do this more often is a result of many factors, including the recency of professional interest in the topic ('parents as a New Found Land') - but certainly relating to our inability to accept or even define the very wide range of purposes, interests, attitudes and skills which parents bring to their involvement with formal education. Researchers tend to be looking for neat, focused, manageable projects; informal learning of and from parents is by definition messy, difficult to define, spread over long periods of time(13).

Faced with a New Found Land, we must, if our explorations are to be fruitful, preserve a certain humility. Parents are under-researched. Even when one looks at what research there is, it tends to be partial, to look at isolated fragments rather than long-term ill-defined collective learning. It concentrates on aspects and mechanisms: how school reports are worded, whether parents can help with reading, what schools and parents do about sex education, etc. etc., The fragments are important, they are individual lakes or mountains

in the New Found Land; but they must sooner or later be incorporated into a general map of the territory. They must engage with and clarify large central concepts such as those discussed at the end of my recent study of School Improvement Councils: participation, authority, information, ideology. One neglected method of engaging with such issues is through comparison, whether cross-national or not()14). Once clarified, these and other concepts need to be worked together into a considered view of how parents and teachers develop over time: both as individuals in relation to children learning, and collectively as contributors to a more or less new social mechanism claiming to add to human choice, justice, responsibility and happiness.

As MacIntyre points out(15), we tend in considering the development of thought in our society to overvalue specific writers at the expense of 'those intricate bodies of theory and practice which constitute human cultures, the beliefs of which are articulated by philosophers and theorists only in a partial and selective manner'. Perhaps no part of our experience as human beings is more central to our sense of humanness than that of being a parent. Thus the attempt, however recent, distorted, tentative and imperfect, to institutionalize that experience and relate it formally to the up-bringing of children is surely of great general interest. When similar initiatives happen in separate societies, we may decently speculate about these gro pings towards a new definition of the parental role, a truer and more complex valuation of what parents can and ought to do for their children and a greater sensitivity to the difficulty of achieving a proper balance between family and state. We may suggest that the new prominence of parents, and goverments' readiness to deploy them to legitimize change and evade decision (e.g. over what children should know about sexual morality), both reflect a deep sense of puzzlement about morality. Parents, lacking any particular uniting characteristic beyond

the capacity to procreate, are the ultimate 'pluralist' group. They can be projected into some sort of provisional prominence to be an informal court of appeal on matters where expert decision is not available. If moral decision has no rational foundation, says MacIntyre,

> Anyone and everyone can... be a moral agent. The contrast between this democratisation of moral agency and the elitist monopolies of managerial and therapeutic expertise could not be sharper. Any minimally rational agent is to be accounted a moral agent; but managers and therapists [i.e. experts] enjoy their status in virtue of their membership within hierarchies of imputed skill and knowledge. In the domain of fact there are procedures for eliminating disagreement; in that of morals the ultimacy of disagreement is dignified by the title 'pluralism'.(16)

If this kind of analysis has any bearing on actual social developments in general, and the institutionalized involvement of parents in particular, then the central questions to ask are these: will the parent movement simply reach - has it already reached - a point of stasis as a convenient way of hiving off certain limited problems, leaving the central decisions to experts? Or will it evolve towards a more collective, social interpretation of the parent's role and function? Will these councils and committees help parents to grow away from the view "This is my child; I am therefore a consumer of his or her education and wish to monitor and control it" towards something closer to

> ...What is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity.(17)

Can we advance towards a new democratic consensus? Can the institutions of parent participation channel and assist that possible advance? Can educational research in turn ask questions broad enough and penetrating enough to encourage movement and ultimately even affect the 'habits of the heart'?(18)

Will the savages stick with the trinkets and trousers they are pleased to receive, or will they gradually transmute the ready-made civilization offered into something bigger and less predictable? Will the New Found Land become not simply 'New Found', but genuinely 'New'?

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2. Ibid, 19.

3. GRAY, J. et.al. Reconstructions of secondary education: theory, myth and practice since the War, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983 places this speech usefully in context; see also, in the narrower context of parent participation, BEATTIE, op.cit, 199 ff. There is a large literature on changes since the mid-1970s, much of it polemical.

4. A well-documented recent overview is CHITTY, CLYDE 'Central control of the school curriculum, 1944-87', History of Education, 17/4, 1988, 321-334; for a stimulating discussion with a comparative dimension, see McLEAN, MARTIN 'The Conservative education policy in comparative perspective: return to an English Golden Age or harbinger of international policy change?' British Journal of Educational Studies, 36/3, 1988, 200-217.

5. I was constantly reminded while I was there that Massachusetts is not the USA, and that some other states have a more centralist and directive style.

6. E.g. GOODLAD, JOHN I. A place called school-prospects for the future, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1984. For a thoughtful review of general thinking behind 'school improvement' in the USA, see MILLER, LYNNE and ANN

LIEBERMAN 'School improvement in the United States: nuance and numbers'. Qualitative Studies in Education, 1/1, 1988, 3-19.

7. BEATTIE, NICHOLAS, 'Legislating for dynamism: School Improvement Councils in Massachusetts, 1985-88'. Unpublished typescript, December 1988.

8. BEATTIE (1985) op.cit., 39.

9. See for example, the description of the elections to Italian school councils held in February 1975: Beattie (1985) op.cit, 83 ff.

10. BEATTIE (1985) op.cit., 40 and 89.

11. Consider for example, the European Parents' Association, formed in 1983. However sceptical one may be in the short term about the impact of generations voiced in Strasbourg by a handful of middle-class parents, the relationship of EPA to the funds and information channels of the European Community, may mean that in the long term their potential may be considerable: See EUROPEAN PARENTS' ASSOCIATION, A partnership for equivalent educational opportunities Proceedings of the Second EPA Congress held in Strasbourg, France, 30-3, January 1988, Strasbourg, EPA, 1988.

12. ATKIN, JANET et.al., Listening to parents: an approach to the improvement of home-school relations. London, Croom Helm, 1988. Useful recent collections of papers on the British scene include: CULLINGFORD, CEDRIC (ed.), Parents, teachers and schools, London, Robert Royce, 1985, and BASTIANI, JOHN (ed.) Parents and teachers 1, Perspectives on home-school relations, Windsor, NFER-Nelson 1987.

13. Jowett and Baginsky wrestle with some of these issues in their recent enquiry into practice in England and Wales (JOWETT, SANDRA and MARY BAGINSKY, 'Parents and education: a survey of their involvement and a discussion of some issues'. Educational Research, 30/1, 1988, 36-45). Another interesting study, unusual in its attempt to review practice over time, is PASCAL, CHRISTINE, 'Democratised primary school government: a decade of development, 1976-1986', Educational Studies, 13/3, 1987, 267-279.

14. For an excellent example of the usefulness of comparison within one country, see ZERCHYKOV, Ross and DON DAVIES Leading the way: state mandates for School Advisory Councils in California, Florida and South Carolina, Boston, Institute for Responsive Education, 1980 (cyclostyled).

15. MacINTYRE, ALASDAIR After virtue: a study in moral theory, London, Duckworth, 1981, 10.

16. Ibid, 30.

17. Ibid, 205.

18. BELLAH, ROBERT N. et.at., Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life, New York, Harper and Row, 1986. Bellah and his colleagues ask whether Americans can move beyond the crisis of their institutions to formulate a new and more creative consensus - see e.g. p.287. I found their analysis of great interest not only in explicating the America I visited so rapidly in May 1988, but also in posing questions pertinent to Europe, too.